

Published on *Pesticide Action Network* (<http://www.panna.org>)

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The struggle against methyl iodide: A year in review



Thu, 2012-01-12 15:36
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Opposition to cancer-causing methyl iodide is at a fever pitch in California, a year after the Schwarzenegger Administration approved the chemical for use in the state.

As Gov. Jerry Brown considers action on methyl iodide in 2012, as well as the appointment of a new chief pesticide regulator, it's worth reflecting on PAN's efforts to ensure safe strawberries over the past year.

It's not too much of a stretch to say PAN and our allies, including leading scientists, held back the tide.

"If no one said anything, I think the chemical would be used more widely," said Liz Elwood Ponce, co-owner of Lassen Canyon Nursery in Redding. Only six small applications of methyl iodide have been made in California over the past year, a state where 8,500 fumigations take place annually.

We definitely said something. We held numerous press conferences, filed legal briefs, conducted research, and supported the efforts of scientists and community leaders to bring their evidence and stories to light. And we did it in partnership with thousands of our members.

So why was methyl iodide approved?

Strawberries are big business in California, supplying a majority of the fruit for the entire country. And, in many cases, they are grown with the use of toxic pesticide fumigants that sterilize the ground. When one of the most common fumigants (methyl bromide) was phased out under international treaty for depleting the ozone layer, pesticide manufacturers began pushing a new product: known carcinogen methyl iodide.

In December 2010, just before leaving office, Gov. Schwarzenegger and then-chief pesticide regulator Mary-Anne Warmerdam approved the use methyl iodide. Scientists who were tasked with reviewing the chemical have stated that the “science was subverted” in the approval process.

Now, Governor Jerry Brown has the opportunity to stand up for the science and take methyl iodide off the shelf.

The year in review

Here's the chronology of some noteworthy events from the past year:

- **January:** PAN, United Farm Workers and others file a lawsuit against the California Department of Pesticide Regulation and pesticide manufacturer Arysta for approving methyl iodide.
- **March:** Governor Jerry Brown publicly states he will reconsider the approval of methyl iodide.
- **May:** Over 200,000 people, including dozens of independent scientists, urge EPA to take action on methyl iodide.
- **June:** The first of a handful of small methyl iodide applications are made; faith and health leaders in Fresno take a stand.
- **August:** PAN, Planned Parenthood Mar Monte and California partners educate Sacramento policymakers about the dangers of fumigations, including pesticide drift. Our attorneys also unearthed documents demonstrating that pesticide regulation officials used a mix-and-match approach when reviewing the science and trying and approve methyl iodide.
- **November:** In response to pressure from pesticide manufacturer lobbyists, community leaders on the CA's central coast work with elected officials to publicly oppose methyl iodide.
- **December:** Farmers say methyl iodide is too risky and costly to use.

And today, there's even more news to report. This morning, a judge in the Alameda County Superior Court heard arguments regarding the legality of California's approval of methyl iodide. The lawsuit was filed over a year ago by Earthjustice and California Rural Legal Assistance, Inc. on behalf of PAN and many partners.

As we wait for the judge's verdict, let's keep the pressure on Gov. Jerry Brown.

Take Action » Send Gov. Brown a message and urge him to make methyl iodide a priority in 2012.

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